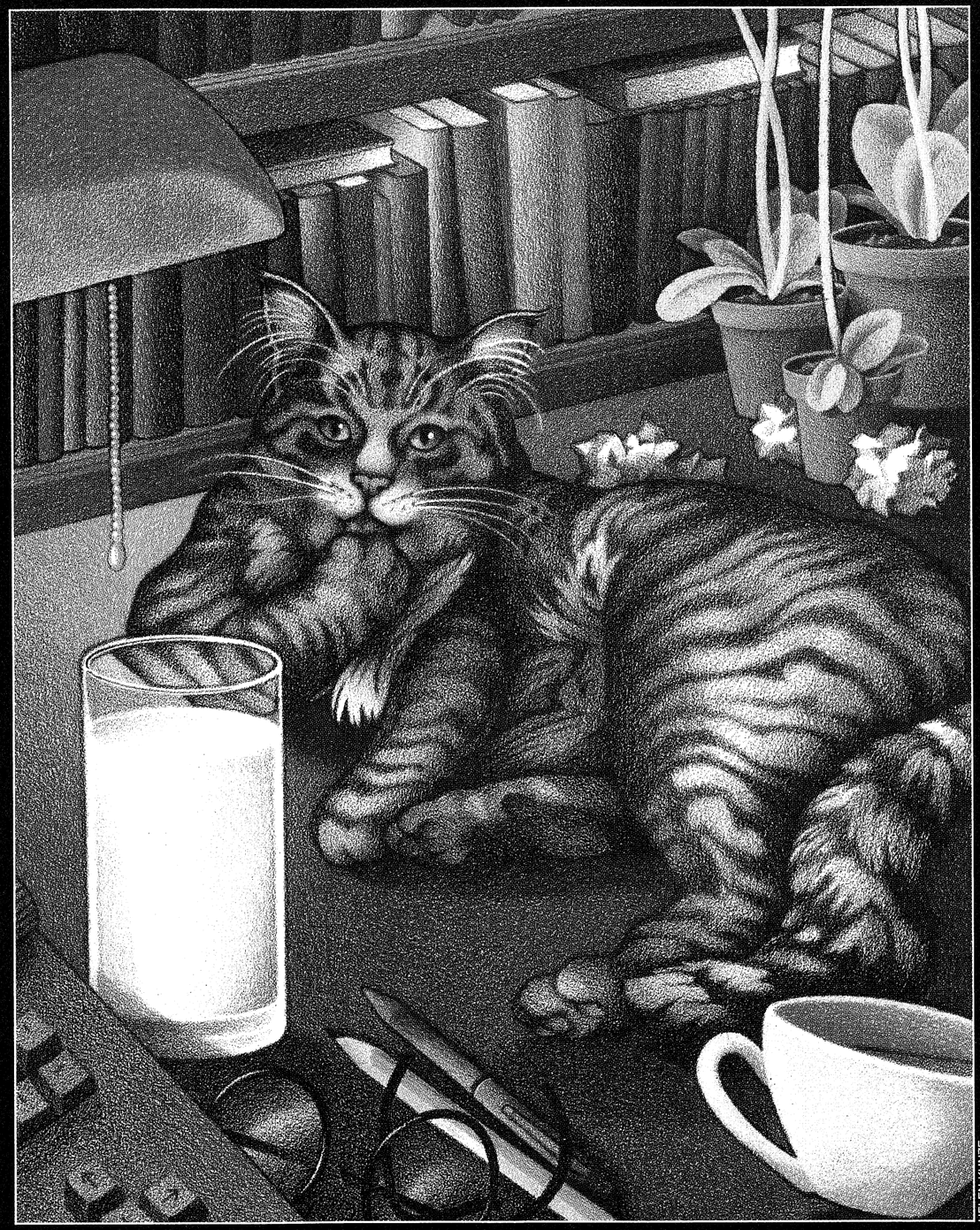


HELEN KUNZE

A CANTICLE

FOR ROADCAT

BY ROBERT JAMES WALLER

I HAD A FRIEND...AND HIS NAME WAS ROADCAT. He was young when I was young and old when I was middle-aged. Still, our lives overlapped for a while, and I am grateful for that.

He was more than a friend, really. Friend and colleague is perhaps a better image. In fact, I sometimes introduced him to strangers as my research associate. We worked together on cold, gray afternoons, poring over books and papers, while the wood stove quietly crackled its way through another Iowa winter.

Sometimes he lay upon my lap and served as a round and honest book rest. He purred and occasionally reached out to turn pages for me, randomly and with a keen appreciation of the virtues surrounding leisurely scholarship. In the spring, as the days warmed, he moved to the desk, clearing a place for himself by pushing to the floor paper, pens, staplers, and other implements of a writer's trade.

He came from a field of long grass behind our house in Columbus, Ohio. Just a few inches in length, he walked along the cement of one of those smarmy subdivisions that make your teeth curl.

A neighbor's child abused him. He fought back, as any of us would, and the child's mother screamed something about rabid cats. My wife observed that the child deserved something more than he got and brought the kitten home for the customary saucer of milk.

I set him on my lap and said, "This is going to be a fine-looking cat." But we were on the move in those times and had already promised our daughter one of the kittens from a litter down the street. So the migrant was fed and sent along.

I sat down to read the paper, glanced up, and he had reappeared on the opposite side of the house at the patio screen door. He looked in at me, and I looked back. He coughed continuously and badly, tried to cry, but the effort was soundless. I picked him up, looked him over with a modest expertise gained from years of living around animals, and said I was taking him to the veterinarian's office.

The examination was lengthy. He had worms, ear mites, fleas, and a serious case of bronchitis. I asked the vet, "Is this a road cat?" The doctor smiled, "This is your genuine road cat."

We drove home together, he and I and, of course, four kinds of medicine in a brown paper bag. He sat on the car seat, small and uncomplaining, watching me, bright face hopeful. The nursery opened. Roadcat had come to stay.

And it is here, before going on, that I must deal with the issue of sentimentality.

If I do not come to grips with that, you might dismiss the rest of what I have to say as mawkish and lacking sound perspective.

Humans have an arrogant manner of ranking life, as if some squat, three-level hierarchy of existence were fact instead of intellectual artifice. God by various names is way up there, of course, in the first position. A little further down, just a little, lies humankind. Below that, and far below, according to common belief, rests a great squishy level of everything else. Here, we find plants and animals. Maybe even rivers and mountains.

All right, let's admit that some transcending presence roams above us. Some call it God, some call it science. Others of us see it as a design so perfect, a great swirling form of truth and beauty and justice and balance, that cosmic ecology might be our term.

That leaves us and the rest. And if you're going to attempt rankings, you better have some criteria, some standards of measurement, to use in making your judgments. The problem is that we humans generate the criteria by which the rankings are made. That's letting the fox in with the chickens, or the cat in with the canary, or us in with beauty. Take your choice.

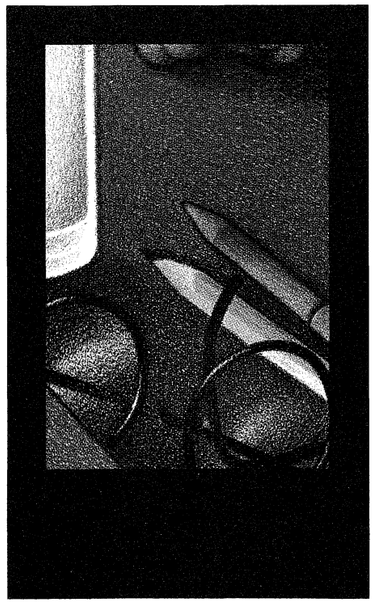
I read the philosophers sometimes. They have criteria, such as consciousness and the ability to use technology, for determining who and what get to belong to various communities. But I do not trust their judgments, for the reason just mentioned. I prefer to think of civilizations that are, well, just different—separate, but parallel and equal.

And I don't spend much time trying to create workable taxonomies either. Others do that sorting rather competently. But taxonomies always end up looking like hierarchies, and things eventually get a little too classified for my taste.

So I just coast along with the notion of parallel civilizations. It works pretty well for me. Bears and butterflies, trees and rivers. I try to live alongside rather than above them. Our world is fashioned to make this difficult, but I try.

Those of you who see things differently, as a matter of "better than" or "on a higher plane than," are to be pitied. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but I know your view is only one-way, and that is down. As such, you miss the grand vistas, the shuddering sense of wonderment that comes from looking out across all the civilizations riding along together on Eddington's great arrow of time.

And so it was with my friend Roadcat.



Riding along on the arrow, we turned the days and marked the pages together. We grinned at each other over sunny afternoons on the deck, and, while he rested in the crook of my folded arm, we tilted our furry heads and stared high and hard at the lights of space just before dawn. Green eyes looking. Blue eyes looking. Wondering about ourselves and the others out there looking back.

We did that for twelve years plus a month or so. And we came to care, and care deeply, one for the other. He clearly saw, as I eventually did, that power and exploitation were not part of the reflections from each other's eyes. We came to a position of trust, and, in his wisdom and elegance, that was all he asked.

I violated that trust only once. I must take time to tell you about it, for the event contains the thread of a hard lesson.

Roadcat represented all the classic definitions of beauty and good taste. The long, soft pelage on his back and sides was predominantly black and gray. His chin was an off-white that flowed into creamy tan along his chest and belly. Symmetrically perfect were his markings, and he watched his world through green eyes of great immensity and color. His face was expressive, his conformation perfect.

Given that, it becomes understandable why we fell into the snare of seeing him as an object. When the local cat fanciers association announced a show limited to animals of something called pet quality, we could not resist.

So Roadcat was put into a wire cage and carried off to the show held as part of the Cattle Congress festivities in Waterloo. Along with the sheep and horses and cattle and hogs, the pet-quality cats would have their day in the ring. He was terrified and panting as I carried him through the crowds, past the ferris wheel and midway barkers, past Willie Nelson's touring bus.

Roadcat's world was the forest, the warm place under the wood stove, and a canvas deck chair in the summer. He was content with himself and required no conspicuous recognition to prove his worth. His colleague apparently did require it. My wife, my daughter, and I wore blue T-shirts we had made up for the occasion that said "Roadcat" in bold, black letters across the front.

I watched him closely in the great hall where the judging was held. He was restless in the cage. Finally, he simply lay down and stared directly at me, straight in the eyes. I could see he was disappointed with me, and I was ashamed at having so ruthlessly shattered our mutual respect. Since a time when I was quite young, I have been angered by those public adulations of the human form called beauty contests, and here I was subjecting my friend to exactly that.

Roadcat refused to be an object. Normally temperate and reserved around strangers, he tore at the paper lining his cage on the judging platform, attempted to push his way through the metal top of his containment, and when the judge put him on a table for all to see, he simply slid onto his back and tried to scratch the well-meaning woman who was to measure his worth.

Suddenly, confusion erupted among the various judges and assistants. A huddle formed around Roadcat, and I went forward to see what was happening. One of the assistant judges had lodged a complaint, contending that Roadcat was a purebred and did not belong in a pet-quality show. The supreme arbiter was consulted, and her verdict was this: Roadcat was the prototype image of a breed called Maine coon cats, descendants of random matings between domestic cats who rode the sailing ships from Europe and wild cats of the New World.

In the American cat shows of the late nineteenth century, the Maine coon cats were the most treasured breed of all. The head judge explained that if this had been

1900, Roadcat would have been the perfect specimen.

But humans are never satisfied with nature, and the Maine coon cats, for reasons not clear to either Roadcat or me, had been bred over the decades to have longer noses. Thus Roadcat was held to be something of a relic, slightly out of date, and was allowed in the show.

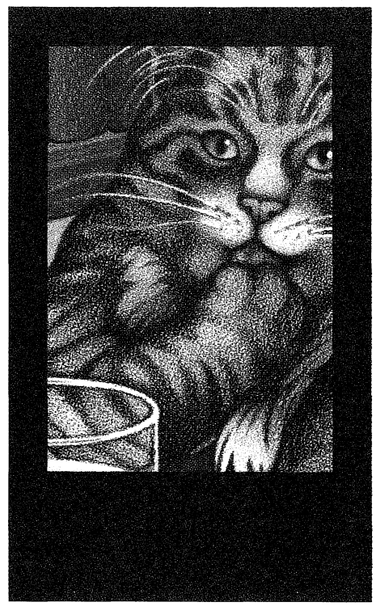
He scored high on appearance. The judge said, "He has a wonderful coat, a beautiful face, and the largest, prettiest green eyes I have ever seen." But, sliding and fighting and slashing out for the nearest human jugular vein within reach, he received a failing grade on the personality dimension and was awarded a fourth-place ribbon. Those green eyes brimmed with nasty satisfaction when the judge said, "I'll bet he's not like this at home, is he?"

Back through the midway, past the ferris wheel, past Willie Nelson's bus, and home to the woods. He was disinterested in his remarkable heritage, slept away his terror, and had nothing to do with any of us for some time. Gradually, he accepted my apologies, and our friendship warmed. But he made me work on recrafting our trust as though it were a fine piece of furniture.

Roadcat was good-natured about most things, though, and seemed to enjoy the little inanities we created around his presence. On pasta nights, his name was changed temporarily to Roadicotta. When my wife, Georgia, held her seasonal pottery sales at our home, he charmed the customers by finding a large pot in which to sit and look out at the commotion. He became "The Retailer" on those occasions. He was "The Chief Inspector" for anything new that came into the house or onto the property, including musical instruments, canoes, and furnaces. In his later years, we called him "The Old Duffer" or "The Big Guy." But mostly he went by Roadie.

He even tolerated the nonsense of my singing songs appropriate to the can of food he and I chose each morning. Seafood Supper? I sang a verse of an old whaling song to the pitch of the electric can opener. How about Country Style for Cats? That got him "San Antonio Rose" in B-flat major, and Elegant Entre was served with a sprinkling of Cole Porter.

The undergrowth and woodland trails around our house were Roadcat's beat. He was a hunter, but not a killer. Now and then smaller creatures died from fright or the initial pounce when he caught them, yet I never saw him intentionally kill anything.



Not even the night crawlers he brought to me after heavy rains. He plopped them down on a small throw rug, flipped it over to hamper their escape, and seemed pleased with himself.

The chipmunk was very much alive in the summer of 1986 when Roadie strolled through the front door and dropped it. The little guy hit the carpet running, dashed through a pile of old magazines, and disappeared in the general vicinity of the fireplace.

Judging that the chipper would not eat much, I was content to let him stay. The rest of the family, as usual, thought I was deranged. So, after four days of moving furniture, we flushed the poor fellow. The male dog nailed him to the floor in one of those wild scenes that seem to occur only at our house in the woods. Roadcat watched the entire battle with detached interest. Revenge for the cat-show humiliation finally was his.

In his habits he was careful, in his ways he was gentle. He found our dogs inelegant to the point of being despicable, but he liked the little female kitty that came along some years after he joined the craziness that is ours. He smiled tolerantly when she tried to nurse him and, through the years, gently washed her with a pink and tireless tongue.

Roadcat asked for little other than consideration and respect. He ate what was offered and left our food alone, except for my lunchtime glass of milk resting unattended on the table. He could not resist that. Turning around, I would find him sitting by the glass, licking a milk-covered paw.

That was his only sin, and I reached a compromise with him on the matter by providing him occasionally with a little milk in an old jelly glass decorated with etchings of Fred Flintstone. I think Fred reminded him of earlier times, before humans developed the technology of killing to a high and ludicrous art, when his saber-toothed cousins left no doubt about the equality of things. When he thought of that delicious state of affairs, it made the milk taste even better, and he lingered over it, humming to himself about woodlands and cliffs and open meadows turning yellow in the light of a younger sun.

The early bronchitis had taken most of his voice. So when he wanted attention, he would lie on my computer printer while I typed, purr loudly, and look directly into my face. If that failed, he escalated his tactics by jumping into the box holding the printer paper and tearing it off the machine. Finally, if I was so insensitive as to further ignore his requirements, he would race around the house, across my desk, along the balcony railing, and, eventually, onto my lap. He seldom failed in these efforts.

I watched him turn a little more gray here and there, but I suppressed melancholy thoughts of the inevitable. Roadcat maintained a youngness of spirit and, even in his latter days, could race thirty feet up a tree on any crisp spring morning when he felt like doing so. Yet, as we read Barbara Tuchman's *Stillwell and the American Experience in China* together in the last months of his life, I could almost sense something as he purred his way through the pages. I would lift my eyes from the book, smile at him, and softly stroke his head, which he always acknowledged by a slight increase in the intensity of his purring.

In late September of 1987, I caught a slight hesitation in his leap to the basement table where I placed his food, safe from the growling hunger of the dogs. If I had not shared that breakfast time with him all those hundreds of mornings, I would not have noticed anything. But it was there—a slight, ever-so-slight, hesitation, as if he had to gather himself physically for what should have been an easy leap.

Simultaneously, he seemed to be eating a little less than was normal for him. The usual pattern was that he would eat about one-third of the can of food on the first serving. Then the female cat, who deferred to

his seniority, took her turn. Later, Roadcat would come by and finish whatever was left.

But the rhythm faltered. There always was something in the dish at the end of the day. And sometimes he ate nothing after I ladled out the food. His face was thinning a bit, and his coat lost a little of its sheen.

I was about to make an appointment at the veterinarian's when one morning he did not appear for his dawn excursion. It was his custom to come lie near my pillow at first light and wait for me to rise and let him out. The routine was invariant, and the morning it was broken I felt an unpleasant twinge in my stomach.

I searched the house and found him lying in a chair in the back bedroom upstairs. I knelt down beside him, spoke softly, and ran my hand over his fur. He purred quietly, but something was not right.

While waiting for the vet's office to open, I remembered the previous evening. He had seemed strangely restless. He would get on my lap, then down again, then return for another cycle of the same thing. He did that five times, and I remarked to my wife that it was something of a record. The last time he walked up to my chest and rubbed his cheek against mine. Though he was always pleasantly affectionate, such a gesture was a little out of the ordinary. He was trying to tell me that something was amiss, that it was almost over.

The initial diagnosis was a kidney problem, which is not unusual in older animals. After a few days, we brought him home. He was terribly weak and could scarcely walk. I laid him on a wool poncho, where he stayed the entire night.

In the morning, I carried him to his litter box in the basement and set him down by it. He seemed disoriented and stumbled. I noticed his right leg was limp and curled underneath him when he sat.

Back to the doctor. An X-ray disclosed a large tumor around his heart, which had resulted in a stroke the previous night that paralyzed his right side and left him blind. Wayne Endres is a kind and patient man, but I could see he was working at the edge of his technology.

The following day, a Wednesday, Wayne called with his report. If it had only been a stroke, we might have worked our way out of it, even though cats don't recover from such things easily. But clearly, the tumor was large and growing, and there was little to be done. It was up to me, of course. But Wayne's quiet voice carried the overtones of despair when he said, "Roadcat is not doing well." He refused to offer hope. There wasn't any, and Wayne Endres is an honest man.

Here, at this point, the thunder starts, and civilizations that are normally parallel begin to intersect and become confused. Roadie and I shared a common language of trust, respect, and love, made visible by touching and aural by our private mutterings to one another. But, as it should be, the language of caring is a language of imprecision and is not designed for hard and profound choices.

I had no set of alternatives rich enough to evade the issue and none available that could even ameliorate it. And how could I understand what decision rules lay beating softly in the imprints of Roadcat's genetic spirals? For all I knew, they might be superior to mine, probably were, but I could not tell.

I know how I want to be treated under those dire conditions. But what right did I have to assume that so ancient a civilization as Roadcat's bears the same values as mine? How could I presume to judge when the standards are someone else's and I had not been told?

Surely, though, notions of dignity and suffering must be common to all that lives, whether it be rivers or butterflies or those who laugh and hold your hand and lie with you in autumn grass. So, gathering myself as best I could, I drove slowly through a red and yellow sunset toward Wayne Endres's clinic.

Someone once defined sentimentality as too much feeling for too small an event. But events are seldom small when you're dealing with true companions.

My friend and colleague from all the years and gentle moments lay on a table with white cloth-like paper under him. I sat down, and at the sound and smell of me, he raised his head, straight up came his ears, and his nose wrinkled. Though the room was brightly lit, his brain kept sending a false message of darkness, and the pupils of his green eyes dilated to the maximum as he strained for the light.

He had lost half his body weight. I touched him along the neck, and there was a slight sound. He was trying to purr, but fluid in his throat would not allow it. Still, he wriggled his nose and tried to send all the old signals he knew I would recognize.

I nodded to Wayne and put my face next to that of my friend, trying somehow to convey the anguish I suffered for him and for myself, for my ignorance of right and wrong, and for my inability to know what he might want in these circumstances. I spoke softly to him, struggling with desperate intensity to reach far and across the boundaries of another nation, seeking either affirmation or forgiveness. When all that is linear failed me, I called down the old language of the forest and the plains to tell him, once and finally, of my gratitude for his simply having been.

And I wondered, as did S. H. Hay, "How could this small body hold/So immense a thing as death?"

Eventually, his head lowered, and it was done. Georgia and I carried him home in a blanket and buried him in the woods along one of the trails where he earned his living.

For some days after, I swore I would never go through that again. If it came to euthanasia, I would refuse to be present. I have changed my mind. You owe that much to good companions who have asked for little and who have traveled far and faithfully by your side.

Roadcat didn't just live with us. He was a spirited participant in the affairs of our place. He was kind to us, and we to him. I remember, when I came home in the evenings, how he would move down the woodland path toward me, grinning, riding along on his little stiff-legged trot, tail held high with a slight curl at the tip. I'd hunker down, and we would talk for a moment while he rolled over on his back and looked at me, blinking.

Georgia and I put the shovel away, walked back into the darkness, and stood by the little grave. By way of a farewell, she said, "He was a good guy." Unable to speak, I nodded and thought she had said it perfectly. He was, indeed, a good guy. And a true friend and colleague who rode the great arrow with me for a time, helping me turn the pages in some old book while the wood stove quietly crackled its way through the winter afternoons of Iowa. ■

Robert James Waller, professor of management at the University of Northern Iowa, is a writer, photographer, and musician whose essays deal with the natural environment and other topics. His book of essays, Just Beyond the Firelight, *was published by the Iowa State University Press in 1988 and is now in its second printing.*

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